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SUBJECT: RUSSIA: POLITICS IN VORONEZH MIRRORS NATIONAL SITUATION

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) During an August 6-8 visit to Voronezh oblast, we found a political situation very similar to the national condition. The United Russia and For a Just Russia parties dominate the political scene, opposition forces are ardent but weak, the Russian Orthodox Church plays an influential role, the NGO community is closed out of public spaces, and local officials claim that there are no human rights problems, despite several reports to the contrary. The upcoming State Duma elections promise continued United Russia dominance, while support for the once regionally powerful Communist Party will continue to erode. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (U) Located to the south of Moscow in a region that is known for its rich soil, Voronezh is a city of one million people in a region of 2.5 million. Although the city appears to have a vibrant economy with a bustling downtown business district, the region has had difficulty recovering from the changes that took place during the 1990s that resulted in the loss of its defense industry. In the 1990s, Voronezh was part of the so-called Red Belt due to its consistent support of the Communist party.

United Russia Dominates the Political Scene

¶3. (SBU) The political scene in Voronezh is dominated by United Russia. Governor Vladimir Kulakov, a member of United Russia and Federal Security Service (FSB) veteran, was first elected in December 2000. He was re-elected to a five-year term in 2004. He is one of Russia's few remaining elected regional leaders. United Russia is the largest faction in the regional Duma, holding 40 of 55 seats. The other parties holding seats in the Duma are For a Just Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), a block from the party formerly known as Rodina, and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF).

¶4. (U) The For a Just Russia party is also popular in the region. We saw prominent local coverage of a recent visit to the region by party leader and Federation Council Chairman Sergey Mironov on the front pages of local newspapers a week after his visit. Mironov's portrait also appears on many billboards throughout the city.

¶5. (SBU) In a meeting between embassy officials and nine Duma members on August 7, Nikolay Gaponenko, the For a Just Russia faction leader described his party as being in competition with United Russia, and he promised a spirited campaign in the upcoming

elections that would focus on their social program platform. United Russia Duma Deputy Aleksandr Ponomarev, toed a more ecumenical line and noted that United Russia, Just Russia, Great Russia are all part of a political project created under instructions from the Kremlin that acts in support of the Kremlin. Curiously, even though the KPRF has historically been a potent political force in this section of the "Red Belt," the deputies we met with neglected to mention the KPRF's participation in the Duma and KPRF members were not at the meeting.

¶6. (SBU) A more interesting political dynamic exists at the municipal level. We heard universal dissatisfaction with the current mayor Boris Skrynnikov, of the For a Just Russia party. As a member of the local union of journalists told us, "people are counting the days until he leaves office." He is not viewed as a professional mayor nor has he put a competent team in place. As a result, city services such as roads, water and electricity have been neglected. In addition, the city and regional administration are at odds over use of tax money that is returned from the federal budget. Both sides see the amount as inadequate to cover expenses and they disagree as to how to divide resources. A number of candidates are expected to run for mayor in the next election either later this year or early next year. The timing will be determined by the City Duma.

Opposition is Ardent but Weak

¶7. (SBU) Opposition parties and groups in Voronezh remain dedicated and active even though they have slim to no chance of electoral success. Sergey Naumov, the leader of Yabloko, told us that he expects United Russia and Just Russia to prevail in the December elections. He said democratic parties are too weak to overcome the seven percent election barrier. Despite this, his party has big ambitions. He says it will field candidates in the December election and work hard to get out the vote. Members of the democratic opposition noted to us that they did not consider Naumov

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to be part of the opposition community given his strong political ties to Governor Kulakov.

¶8. (SBU) Other Russia has been active in the area, and staged a March of the Dissenters in May which brought out 100 participants and 3,000 police. In a meeting with members of their local coalition that included representatives of the Union of Right Forces (SPS), National Bolshevik Party, Russian People's Democratic Union and some NGOs, they told us they are subject to harassment which they attribute to the high number of elected or appointed officials in the region who were formerly with the FSB. This harassment includes phone tapping, unauthorized entry into houses, and detainment. Konstantin Makarov of the National Bolshevik Party said he has been harassed, detained, his parents have been questioned, and he has been warned that he could be charged with "social hatred" for continuing his political activities.

¶9. (SBU) While Other Russia has fractured at the national level, in Voronezh the coalition is united. They told us that "Our success in Voronezh is that we have demonstrated that all democratic forces can work together as a united movement." Other members of the coalition in Voronezh include the Defense Youth Organization, Union of Soldiers' Mothers, and Democratic Russia Movement. On August 11, they held a regional primary to determine Other Russia's presidential candidate. Former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, leader of the Russian People's Democratic Union won overwhelmingly with 70 percent of the vote despite having withdrawn from the Other Russia coalition in July.

Russian Orthodox Church Plays Influential Role

¶10. (SBU) The Russian Orthodox Church is a powerful force in this very Orthodox region. As representatives of the Pentecostal church told us, relations between the ROC and other religions appear friendly, but below the surface minority religions have had problems. For example, other religions have had trouble acquiring

land to build churches or mosques as gathering places. For several years, the Pentecostal church has fought in court over a piece of land they bought at auction five years ago. In this case, the city has used the legal system to prevent the church from gaining the land despite the fact that some courts have ruled in favor of the church. The Muslim community has unsuccessfully attempted to get permission to build a mosque for 5-7 years. These groups point out that the ROC has not had any trouble acquiring property or getting permission to build. The ROC acquired a public park in the center of the city to build a church. The church remains under construction and the space is completely cut off to the general public.

¶11. (SBU) As in other parts of the country, a course on the fundamentals of Orthodox Christianity will be taught in Voronezh schools this year. Archimandrite Andrey defended this class telling us that it is necessary in order to "fight for our national interests." He described it as an "absurd situation" that other faiths that are not traditional to Russia are able to have religious schools, yet the ROC cannot offer a course on culture in Russian schools. Pentecostal Bishop Boris Sinebabnov said the course has been billed as voluntary but that parents must actively seek to have their children removed. He said he will not let his children attend this class.

Limiting Space for NGOs

¶12. (SBU) Representatives of NGOs in Voronezh complained that they were often denied space to conduct activities such as meetings, seminars, or press conferences. Andrey Yurov, of Youth Human Rights Movement told us there is little infrastructure available, and what exists is often denied to them by the owners, both public and private. This severely limits their ability to gather a large number of people and sustain their activities. In addition, Yurov complained that the paperwork required by the 2006 NGO law requires even small NGOs to devote one or two staff members to accounting and report filing functions.

The Human Rights Picture

¶13. (SBU) Alyona Obyezdchikova, Program Coordinator of the Inter-Regional Group for Human Rights told us that NGOs in Voronezh are focused on two issues: racially-motivated crimes, and the spotty implementation and enforcement of court decisions. In recent years, Voronezh developed a reputation for xenophobia as a result of numerous attacks on foreign students, including the murder of a Peruvian student in 2005. While there have been more recent violent attacks, the authorities have attributed them to hooliganism. Human rights groups have attempted to work with law enforcement to get

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them to respond to these crimes more quickly and to recognize them as racially motivated. Some say the situation has improved although Andrey Yurov, of the Youth Human Rights Movement, noted that foreign students largely choose to stay in their dorms.

¶14. (SBU) The government is not acting to improve the situation. Yelena Gudkova of the Oblast Administration's Human Rights Commission told us there are no human rights problems in Voronezh. Yurov criticized the government and said that an enlightenment campaign for the people is needed, but that so far the government has only done things for show. The deputy editor of the local bureau of Novaya Gazeta, acknowledged that some problems existed, but that in general the situation has been exaggerated.

RUSSELL